

NY official: Tagged site stole identities

July 9 2009, By VERENA DOBNIK , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- New York's attorney general charged Thursday that Tagged.com stole the identities of more than 60 million Internet users worldwide - by sending e-mails that raided their private accounts.

Andrew Cuomo said he plans to sue the social networking Web site for deceptive marketing and invasion of [privacy](#).

"This company stole the address books and identities of millions of people," Cuomo said in a statement. "Consumers had their privacy invaded and were forced into the embarrassing position of having to apologize to all their e-mail contacts for Tagged's unethical - and illegal - behavior."

Started in 2004 by Harvard math students, Greg Tseng and Johann Schleier-Smith, Tagged calls itself a "premier social-networking destination." The California-based company claims to be the third-largest social networking site after [Facebook](#) and MySpace, with 80 million registered users.

Cuomo said Tagged acquired most of them fraudulently, sending unsuspecting recipients e-mails that urged them to view private photos posted by friends.

The message read: "(name of friend) sent you photos on Tagged."

When recipients tried to access the photos, Cuomo said they would in effect become new members of the site - without ever seeing any photos.

Recipients' e-mail address books would then be lifted, the [attorney general](#) said.

Tagged temporarily suspended its online campaign last month, in response to user complaints.

E-mail and telephone messages from The Associated Press to the company were not immediately returned on Thursday.

In an open letter on the site, dated June 16, Tseng acknowledges that Tagged had received 2,000 complaints "from people who invited all the contacts in their e-mail address books but didn't intend to."

He said that every day, "our members make 2 million new friend connections" using the site's special "feature." But on June 7, in response to the complaints, "we hit the pause button."

The site then e-mailed all new members to offer "information on how to manage their contacts and, if they wanted, how to cancel their membership."

Cuomo said Tagged's problems went far beyond technical glitches.

"This very virulent form of spam is the online equivalent of breaking into a home, stealing address books, and sending phony mail to all of an individual's personal contacts," Cuomo said.

The system was set up so that a user was asked whether the sender of the photos was a friend, then suggesting that if the recipient didn't respond, the friend "may think you said no" (accompanied by a sad face icon).

Any click resulted in the same thing, Cuomo said: Every person on a user's contact list received an e-mail that again read, "(name of user) sent

you photos on Tagged." The site then released a flood of offers for everything from sweepstakes to other services.

By the time a recipient realized there were no photos, it was too late.

On Thursday, a box on the site's home page still read: "NOW HIRING ... click here."

The attorney general said a lawsuit would seek to stop Tagged from engaging in "fraudulent practices" and to seek fines.

Another site founded by Tseng, Jumpstart Technologies, was fined \$900,000 in 2006 by the Federal Trade Commission for violating the CAN-SPAM Act - signed into law in 2003 by President Bush as the anti-spam national standard for commercial e-mail.

At the time, the director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection, Lydia Parnes, said the Tseng-founded site had "intentionally used personal messages as a cover-up for commercial messages."

Such practices not only violate the law, she said, "but also consumer trust."

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